

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES COMPANY PROFILE STATEMENT AND VERY SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

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MAT DESIGN LIMITED

PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT: -

INSTALLATION OF A 2848 PANEL SOLAR FARM, ORGANIC
BOUNDARY FENCING, 1No SUB STATION, 1No
TRANSFORMER BUILDING, SITE SERVICE ACCESS,
ASSOCIATED LANDSCAPING AND BIO-DIVERSITY
IMPROVEMENTS (NET GAIN)

PREPARED ON BEHALF OF:-

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES COMPANY

DATE:

SEPTEMBER 2023

1. INTRODUCTION

Paragraph 151 of the 2023 National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out that “when located in the Green Belt, elements of many renewable energy projects will comprise inappropriate development.

In such cases developers will need to demonstrate very special circumstances if projects are to proceed. Such very special circumstances may include the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewable sources”.

The aforementioned approach is also adopted in the Knowsley Local Plan, where Policy CS23 (Renewable and Low Carbon Infrastructure) sets out that:-

- The Council will support proposals that will produce and distribute decentralised, low carbon and renewable energy, provided that they do not cause significant harm (in terms of their number, scale, siting or cumulative impacts) to:
 - a) Natural resources, biodiversity, geodiversity, water and air quality and landscape character;
 - b) Aviation and transport safety;
 - c) Historical and cultural assets;
 - d) Public amenity and living conditions; or

e) Openness and amenity of the Green Belt, except in very special circumstances.

Part 2 of Policy CS23 identifies that proposed developments must be accompanied by information that shows how the local environment will be protected, and how the site will be restored when energy production ends. This element of Policy CS23 will be assessed in the general planning statement that has been prepared as part of the planning application.

We recognise that the proposed introduction of the 2848 panel solar farm, organic boundary fencing, 1no sub station, 1no transformer building, site service access, associated landscaping and bio-diversity improvements (net gain) does include elements of inappropriate development, and that NPPF paragraph 147 identifies that inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances.

As such, and as part of the preparation of this planning application, we assessed the positive community involvement and the sourcing of renewable energy, which the Neighbourhood Services Company has been an integral part of (over many years).

From that, we generated a series of questions, so as to set out the profile of the Neighbourhood Services Company, and how their proven track record of not for profit business, community involvement and their positive involvement in the procurement of renewable energy and wider environmental improvement schemes.

Our questions, and the answers provided by the Neighbourhood Services Company are set out below, and we consider that when read either individually or as a bundle, provide a series of Very Special Circumstances (VSC).

We also consider that when the VSC that are set out within this statement are then considered with all of the other VSC and positive environmental enhancements to the site, the harm to the green belt that is caused by the elements of inappropriate development, are outweighed by other considerations (The VSC).

The conclusion of this statement lists the VSC that we consider are relevant, based on evidence provided by NSC by way of their community engagement programmes, community employment and a proven track record in commissioning solar based renewable energy that serves local community buildings.

2. NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES COMPANY

The questions and evidence that provide Very Special Circumstances are listed below:-

3. NSC PROFILE AND COMMUNITY HISTORY.

The Neighborhood Services Company (NSC) is a not for profit company (Registered Company Number 04173535), and was formed as a building and environmental maintenance social business Limited by Guarantee in 2001. The company was established to provide training and employment opportunities to young unemployed 16-19s. NSC developed work and training opportunities working with local councils and the emerging social housing companies, securing small contracts to develop training programs, often leading to apprenticeships and permanent jobs for young people in the North of Merseyside.

Over the past 22 years NSC, working with our partner Alt Valley Community Trust, have developed as one of the City Regions largest social businesses that has gone on to develop a range of associated businesses delivering services in the community and maintaining our commitment to providing training and employment opportunities in the North City Region.

Since 2001 NSC has worked with local communities and has

- Refurbished and reopened 2 shopping parades and built a shopping parade in a disadvantaged community
- Opened 2 Children's Day nurseries offering quality care at competitive prices
- Provides a day social care service for adults with learning difficulties.
- Manages a farm attraction in Croxteth Park which is also a commercial farm, training center and school environmental education center and;
- Commissioned and completed 6 renewable energy projects (see section 5)

In 2006 NSC moved onto Randles Bridge Farm (Larkins) [Knowsley](#) to expand its building and environmental business, provide training and placement opportunities for its Adult Social Care work as well as providing a base to expand training and develop environment education to local schools.

As part of its commitment to biodiversity and the environment, NSC has utilised a substantial part of the farm (around 4 acres) to create a 'wetlands' area excavating 5 ponds to support and increase wildlife along with successfully encouraging several 'red book' species back to the area.

This project was part funded in conjunction with Veolia and details of the success of the project and the biodiversity net gain that has evolved from that project, are evidenced in the Ecological Appraisals and assessments that form part of this planning application.

4. NSC OPERATIONS IN THE COMMUNITY.

The Building & Environmental Maintenance section of NSC have been carry out programmed and reactive maintenance work for local housing associations since early 2000's. Contracts with Cobalt Housing and Torus (formerly LMH) span decades were in recent years they have developed a working relationship with Onward Housing's contractor Axis.

Across the 3 social housing companies the properties accessible to maintenance are in excess of 80,000 and NSC has delivered the following significant training contracts:-

- Welfare to work 16 to 25s pre-2006
- Future Jobs 18 plus (2010-2012 successfully placed in circa of 900 + people into employment for 6months placements)
- ILMs 16 plus (2016-2020 Over 1,000 people effectively placed on a 6mth training placement)
- Kick Start 18 -25 (2021-2022 Offering 6mth employment opportunities to hundreds over 18mth period)

To date we have provided training opportunities for thousands with a 75% success rate of people furthering into jobs or education, and as a CITB registered member, we have directly trained over 175 full construction apprentices covering all trades.

All the above European and Government funded projects have been delivered across the City Region

5. RENEWABLE SCHEMES COMMISSIONED BY NSC

NSC have commissioned and installed 6 renewable energy projects that provide a total power generation of 188Kwh of green energy into the national/local grid. This comprises of:-

- 2 wind turbines and a 30 kilowatt solar system on Larkins Farm that harness 46Kwh green energy:-
- A roof mounted solar system at Croxteth Communiversity 31Kwh green energy;
- A roof mounted solar system at Dovecot Multi Activity Centre 41Kwh green energy ,;
- A roof mounted solar system at Ellergreen Education & Community Centre 30Kwh green energy and;
- A roof mounted solar system at The Vauxhall Neighbourhood Council 40Kwh green energy.

The proposed solar farm would add a further 1424Kwh (total 1612Kwh) of green energy into the national/local grid and provide renewable energy for up to 165 homes.

6. THE WETLAND DEVELOPMENT TO THE SOUTHPART OF THE NSC SITE

From 2012-2014, and in conjunction with funding from Veolia Environmental Trust, NSC developed a project that consisted of the creation of a footpath to span the site, the removal of vegetation and topsoil along with the levelling & compacting of earth.

Following that, NSC installed a raised walkway approximately 35m out of recycled wood and constructing viewing platforms, along with the formation 5 pond's of various widths and depths to encourage various species of wildlife. This included an island to encourage and protect ground nesting birds.

The pond system and walkway has helped to encourage local schools and children to visit the site, which in turn has helped to promote the concept of wildlife and bio-diversity -n the Knowsley area.

7. OTHER NSC BIO-DIVERSITY SCHEMES.

Within the first few years at Larkins Farm NSC were part of a tree management program. This involved the removal of Rhododendron in the ancient woodlands adjacent to Larkins Farm. Different tree species were planted that were donated as part of the 'Little wood' project in an attempt to connect old Knowsley wood corridor which adjoins Larkins Farm.

In 2021 NSC began to work with a local beekeeper, introducing 4 hives to Randles Bridge Farm in an attempt to produce local honey. This venture has been extremely successful within the first couple of seasons and are looking to increase the number of hives.

8. OTHER NSC BENEFITS TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY;

Across the NSC Companies over 90 people are directly employed, with NSC always seeking to employ locally wherever it is able. Training opportunities are provided throughout the businesses.

NSC have made a considerable contribution to regeneration through its training programmes involving thousands of trainees progressing into work or education.

Over the years NSC have invested both funds and time in to the local communities in the hope of safeguarding a number of benefits such as accessible services, job sustainability and supporting local businesses.

NSC purchased a local derelict shopping centre to refurbish and bring back into operation for the community, this is fully leased to local businesses.

MAT DESIGN LIMITED Planning & Building Control Consultancy Tel: 07850203448 Email miketa@blueyonder.co.uk	Project: THE NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES COMPANY - INSTALLATION OF A 2848 PANEL SOLAR FARM AT LARKINS FARM, GELLINGS LANE, KNOWSLEY. L34 9EN	By: MCC	Date: 11/9/2023 Revision:
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Rescuing a community pub from closure.

Buying a drugs support centre from the receiver and leasing it back to the drugs agency to avoid closure of an essential service within the area.

Releasing a shopping centre from the receivers to enable local businesses to continue trading along with investing in its refurbishment. Also, within the same area purchasing a derelict grade 2 former public house and developing the building into a children's day nursery.

After consultation with the local community NSC successfully built a shopping parade in an area where the former council shops had been demolished.

9. NSC EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

NSC employ 17 people with their sister companies employing a further 70+ people directly. The aim is to further develop the work force to encompass a section to maintain and manage NSC's and AVCT's solar power systems as we seek to install solar power around all of NSC & AVCT buildings, using Larkins Farm as the main base.

8. THE POSITIVE INFLUENCE OF NSC INTO THE COMMUNITY

NSC interacts with and positively influence thousands of people on a weekly basis through; the shopping parades for the general public and tenants, 2 Children's Day nurseries offering local affordable childcare for the communities, training programmes accessible to local residents and residents across the city region, Farm attraction in Croxteth Park available to the general public and educational visits for local schools and also working with our charitable partner AVCT alone.

NSC aim to use local suppliers for its materials. NSC's main area of work within the Local Housing Association sector creates an annual expenditure of around £500,000 within the local economy. Employees are positively influenced with job sustainability with some employees having 20 years plus service.

9. WILL THIS SOLAR FARM BENEFIT NSC INTERMS OF ITS COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The proposed solar farm will create an income stream to fund the provision of all the services and provide an investment to support training projects, continued investment in our regeneration work in the community and make the organisation more sustainable and less reliant on loans to fund our work.

The green energy income will also enable NSC to reintroduce and subsidise the work with local schools across both the linked farms, whilst enabling the introduction of a new element, 'sustainable farming' to the educational visits.

10. THE POSITIVE COMMUNITY BENEFITS OF THE SOLAR FARM

Along with the obvious benefits of green energy being sent to the National Grid, this scheme will also create employment opportunities within the 'Manage & Maintain' solar power systems for NSC and its partner companies/charity, whilst local schools will have access to educational visits and green energy learning across the site to covering 3 areas of farming; Livestock/agricultural and technological farming to benefit the ecology and ultimately the sustainability of the land and environment.

11. LEARNING ABOUT GREEN ENERGY AND BIODIVERSITY?

Working with NSC Home Farm we will expand the environmental education work offered to local schools to include a visit to the farm, experience the wetlands, woodland, see first-hand the turbines and solar farm system and their contribution to energy security/conservation and the new approach to sustainable farming.

NSC Home Farm employs a fulltime and a part time teacher who are based at Croxteth Park Farm. We currently provide practical environmental education and conservation opportunities to schools in the city region with daily visits organised to Croxteth Park Farm. Prior to Covid this also included mini farmers in Larkins Farm (this was successfully created with the help of funding through a Lottery Local Food Project).

The plan moving forward is to integrate the educational visit and reintroduce Larkins farm to the curriculum. This will cover an additional 2 areas of farming; a working agricultural farm and present sustainable farming with the solar farm and turbines. Along with schools experiencing the wetlands and woods.

The pupils will learn about the development of each section and the positive contributions it has to the biodiversity within the area.

13. NSC VERY SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

- An established track record of not for profit community involvement and engagement;
- The provision of community employment opportunities;
- The commissioning and completion of community based projects for the benefit of local people;
- The commissioning and completion of environmental improvement projects for the benefit wildlife and biodiversity improvements;

- The formation of educational environmental learning and training for the community;
- The provision of further employment opportunities as part of the new solar farm project;
- Adding to the community engagement programme through a new working agricultural farm model, to focus on sustainable farming with the solar farm and turbines. Along with schools experiencing the wetlands and woods.
- The establishment and completion of 6 renewable energy projects that now provide 188Kwh to the national/local grid;
- The provision of a further 1424Kwh of energy to the to the national/local grid;

14. CONCLUSIONS AND VERY SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

The aforementioned information and evidence provides substantial support towards the support of this of this planning application, and clearly shows how NSC have become and established community stakeholder in Knowsley, through their positive contribution towards community involvement, locally based environmental projects and the delivery of renewable energy to support NSC and other locally based community projects and centres.

In particular, we would highlight the VSC bullet points that are taken from the above evidence in this statement, provide a series of VSC that positively support this planning application.

When these VSC are considered in conjunction with the contribution of new green energy from the proposed solar farm, along with the bio-diversity nett gain improvements, we consider that the proposed development complies with the provisions of NPPF paragraph 151 through the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewable sources.

We conclude that the VSC that are set out in this statement, when considered with the VSC that are defined in the planning statement and ecological reports, clearly outweigh the harm caused to the openness of the green belt in this part of Knowsley.

As such, we would ask that Local Planning Authority positively considers this planning application, so as to support the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewable sources, and to further promote the NSC in the community.